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Between Neoliberalism and Identity Politics: Academic Librarianship, Democracy and November 8, 2016☆

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A B S T R A C T

Recent calls for papers (CFPs) in academic librarianship have drawn heavily on the language of identity politics. This presents a number of problems: 1) the confusions between identity politics and its close allies like diversity or professional identity; 2) the confusions within identity politics; 3) the backlash to identity politics represented by November 8, 2016; and 4) controversies over the concept within its allies - personified by Mark Lilla. This paper seeks to chart a path among these ideas to formulate a practical political response to these developments.

Introduction

The recent Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians (CAPAL) 2017 conference came at an interesting juncture, roughly six months after the November 8, 2016 US presidential election. Representing a leading edge of discourse and discussion (that is, well before a critical mass of publications) CAPAL – along with a number of recent calls for papers (CFP) primarily in the US – featured a heavy emphasis on the language of identity politics. By this I mean a recitation of categories and issues to frame the conference and/or research theme such as age, sexual orientation, gender orientation, disability, the Charleston victims, physical appearance, body size, race, indigenous peoples – their rights, histories and heritage, ethnicity, religion, queering the workplace, Black Lives Matter, transgender rights, and personal beliefs – and behaviors related to those categories such as micro-aggressions, offensive verbal comments, intimidation, harassing photography, inappropriate physical contact, unwelcome sexual attention, and worse – which are associated with historically entrenched systems of oppression.[1] I take this to be academic librarianship's belated-but-ethically-defensible recognition of irreducible pluralism and a call for respect and dignity across the identity spectrum. Very mild versions of it have drawn the attention of and occasional attacks from the political right (Editors, 2016; Waters, 2017).

Nor is this discursive move limited to CFPs in academic librarianship: the American Library Association now routinely compiles and distributes a list of Council Candidates based on (some) of these identity politics categories (http://bit.ly/2017aladiversecandidates). This trend and discursive move is distinct from the longstanding literature on *professional* identity: "Lists of trends in academic libraries and higher education do not always make explicit connections to the changing roles of librarians, the shifting identity required to tackle these new trends and roles, or the agency that librarians may or may not experience as they work at the vanguard of these transformations."[2] It is also different from concerns over and/or policies to address diversity and multiculturalism within the profession, often also expressed in the language of identity (Gonzalez-Smith, Swanson, & Tanaka, 2014; Swanson et al., 2015). These do of course overlap, but there is an important distinction to be made between professional identity and identity politics that is worth preserving. Two strands of critique reveal that distinction.

The first contends that while multiculturalism and diversity are the "dominant conceptual framework" and policy stance within Library and Information Science (LIS), they are a superficial "trope … concerned chiefly with questions of representation" and inadequate "as a basis for in-depth investigations [while] meaningful dialogue [is] evaded" (Hudson, 2017, 3–4). In other words, diversity is a "lite" intellectual

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[1] This listing is drawn from the CAPAL 17 CFP (http://capalibrarians.org/2016/11/cfp-for-capal17-foundations-futures-critical-reflections-on-the-pasts-presents-and-possibilities-of-academic-librarianship/) and the conference's safe space statement (http://conference.capalibrarians.org/a-safe-space/), supplemented with the CFPs for the ACRL/NY 2016 Symposium on Money and Power (http://libraryjuicepress.com/blog/?p=5204), the 2016 LACUNY Institute on libraries, racism, and antiracism and its bibliography of resources (https://2016lacunyinst.commons.gc.cuny.edu/proposals/, https://2016lacunyinst.commons.gc.cuny.edu/resources/), an edited book on language, modes of communication, and academic libraries (http://libraryjuicepress.com/blog/?p=5219), and the ACRL/NY 2015 Symposium on Social Responsibility, Democracy, Education, and Professionalism (https://acrlnysymp2015.wordpress.com/program/).

[2] From the CFP for the Identity, Agency, and Culture in Academic Libraries Conference (https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/eblip/index.php/EBLIP/article/view/28254/20749). See also Hansson (2010) and Hicks (2014).

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form of talking about and acting on identity politics. The CFPs mentioned often implicitly endorse this line of thinking. The second critique concerns the overlap of a good bit of this discourse with the old (and tiresome) librarian "image issue" – professional identity now intermixing with diversity, self-presentation and technological shifts/proficiencies as drivers of perception of LIS by other professions and the public (Buschman, 2004; Hicks, 2014, 159–163). A book chapter subtitled "The Identity Politics of the Librarian Stereotype" about librarians' clothing choices and self-presentation (Pagowsky & Rigby, 2014) invokes the concept in a particularly vapid manner.[3] The CFPs mentioned implicitly point toward intellectually deepening this discourse: "The primary goal [is not] of contesting stereotypes—though [that] remains a significant though limited venture. [We] must constitute and sustain discursive and institutional networks that deconstruct earlier strategies for … identity formation, demystify power relations that incorporate class, patriarchal and homophobic biases and … articulate the complexity and diversity of … practices in the modern and postmodern world" (West, 1999, 131).

What then is it about identity politics that is distinct from these strands? There is commonality in the factual recognition that modern, democratic societies are "characterized by deep diversity and cultural pluralism," that this has been "ignored or stifled by models of the 'normal' citizen," and that those who deviated from that model were "subject to exclusion, marginalization, silencing, or assimilation" (Kymlicka, 2002, 327; Coles, 2002). While there is a *politics of identity* – the assertion of the importance of distinctions among people and groups[4] along with the call for recognition of those differences (Calhoun, 1994; Jones, 2010) – there is now in identity politics a "distinct political practice [with] cultural and political goals" (Bernstein, 2005, 48) that constitutes a "project of emancipation" (Muldoon, 2010, 679). Political changes and goals are sought – both policies/legislation *and* cultural changes – to be brought about in venues from the institutional (government, courts, schools), to the personal (families, relationships), to language and portrayals in the media. Identity politics implies a more expansive view of rights – including the right to evaluate the identity choices one makes as well as those made for you when young – and realizing the political and social conditions to meaningfully exercise those rights in the course of one's life choices (Bernstein, 2005; Kymlicka, 2002, 237; Coles, 2002). The language used in the CFPs quoted earlier has much more in common with identity politics so understood than the discourse on librarians' professional identity in seeking recognition, status, perceptions, improved image, or representation of diversity in LIS – all of which tend to imply a "privileged and relatively static and definitive [social and political] code" (Coles, 2002, 302). This then is their goal, and identity politics – so understood – is the tactic (or strategy).

Controversy

This language move in LIS coincides with the rise of a politics hostile to these very ideas, resulting in November 8, 2016. The winning campaign featured overt verbal attacks on women (Shalby, 2016), Mexican-Americans and Mexicans (Reilly, 2016), black Americans (Fausset, Blinder, & Eligon, 2016), Muslim-Americans and Muslims (Burns, Haberman, & Parker, 2016), Native Americans (Lee, 2016), people with disabilities (Kessler, 2016), Jews (Milbank, 2016), veterans and prisoners of war (Burns, 2016), and of course immigrants (Press, 2016). The campaign recognized and played on sharp divisions: between rural and urban (DelReal & Clement, 2017), between those who have successfully adapted economically to the new economy and those who have not – largely paralleling the rural/urban divide (Tankersley, 2016), between the deserving poor (most often whites) and the undeserving poor (most often non-whites) (MacGillis, 2015; Rampell, 2016) and between self-sorted hostile groups, regions and political affiliations (Haidt & Abrams, 2015). There was as a result persistent small-scale violence during the campaign (Mathis-Lilley, 2016) and after (Dickerson, 2016), and an unusual public presence and seeming political legitimacy for racist and hate-groups (J. Goldstein, 2016; Shear & Haberman, 2017).

Identity politics celebrates that which is "deeply intertwined with conceptions of value and meaning for people," while at the same *not* implying the "valorization of white racial pride"; that is those who "have enjoyed social superiority" should not "formulate their values … in terms of that superior position" (Christman, 2002, 160) – very much felt as a cause of deep resentment and a source of backlash manifested in November 8, 2016. Essentially (and ironically), the contentiousness over identity politics seemed to come down to *white* identity politics. To put the case gently, "It's one thing to support [progressive causes]. It's another thing entirely to write off opponents…. [P]eople deeply resent being told they're evil" when they disagree over progressive policies (French, 2016). The winning campaign "gave a national forum to those conflicts and resentments [and] liberated the white-working-class id…. They could discharge decades – generations – of suppressed frustration on any target" (Cowie, 2017).

That often boiled down to the catch-all charge of "political correctness" – a stand-in for the categories noted at the beginning of this article and their accompanying complex and "intricate norms … whose violation risks an accusation of bigotry" (Willer, 2016). It is both white identity politics as a "marker of how resources and opportunities are distributed in our society … [the] advantages and disadvantages [that carry] both economic and social consequences" (Perry, 2016), and a resentment against the image of a

> utopia of beards, tattoos, fixed-gear bikes and do-it-yourself commerce … knitting, raising chickens, distilling whiskey, … home bacon-curing … making art and displaying … in pop-up galleries and boutiques, farm-to-table kitchens and temples of mixology. … [This] sweet, silly, self-important, stuff-white-people-like Gestalt that … is both countercultural and entrepreneurial, offer[s] an aesthetic of radicalism without the difficult commitment[s:] … local, artisanal, communal protest against the homogenizing forces of corporate culture and a new way of being bourgeois, [thus] participating in the destruction of non-middle-class social space. Its rebellious energies are focused largely on restaurants, retail and real estate (Scott, 2014).

This divide is of course not limited to the United States. Ethno-nationalism in Europe is shot through with white- or anti-identity politics depending on your perspective (Taub, 2016), and shortly after the election commentator Van Jones warned that Canadians are in no way immune to these kinds of politics (Rieti, 2016) – as witnessed by the undercurrent of identity politics in the controversies over the long-form census (Ramp & Harrison, 2012).

As if November 8, 2016 and its lead-up were not enough, there has arisen a persistent controversy over identity politics within the left, personified by Columbia University professor Mark Lilla. He strongly questioned identity politics and the political ethos it implies in a widely-read *New York Times* piece soon after the election. Liberalism, he says, "has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has … prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing" (Lilla, 2016a). He makes a key distinction between the fixation on identity and diversity: "Diversity as a social goal and aim of social reform is an excellent thing. But identity politics today [is] about *personal identity* … more narcissistic and less connected to larger political themes [with] a loss of a sense of proportion" (in E. Goldstein, 2016, italics added). Lilla wrote the piece that started the

[3] This shallow theme also crops up in the accepted papers of the Identity, Agency, and Culture in Academic Libraries Conference (http://iacal2016.wixsite.com/iacal2017/accepted-proposals).

[4] It is worth clarifying here that identity as a concept encompasses both individuals and groups; that is, one's self and/or the identification with a group are considered together here in the formation of identity.